

Colour Play in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* Shazia Sadaf

The God of Small Things is complex in its simplicity. Its language is a tantalizing play on the familiarly unfamiliar. The monsoon moist, intensely coloured Keralese backdrop is startlingly novel for Western readership. The characters, their names, and issues of class are an immediate challenge to the apathetical reader. The movement is dynamic, yet subjective in tone; the narrative detached, yet painfully moving. For all its seemingly erratic stylistic devices, *The God of Small Things* emerges as a perfectly harmonious work because of an underlying threadwork of connecting ideas. One such connecting mesh is the use of colour-codes within the novel, which gives it direction and coherence. Colours are used as a suggestive device to help invoke the required feelings in the readers.

The importance of colour perception in philosophical studies can be traced as far back as Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* where he theorizes that the perception of colour by each individual may be a subjective experience. Inversely, research has claimed that "coloured light can powerfully affect the human condition" (Humphrey 38). In more recent years theories of colour psychology have gained ground in many subject areas. The term "mental colour" today generally stands for qualitative mental properties of colour experiences. In fact, colour psychology has become an effective tool as means of silent manipulation in marketing and advertising fields.

Subjectivism in colour theory means that the hues we attribute to physical objects in colour experiences are mental qualitative properties of visual states themselves. Hence the subjectivist claim that all physical objects are colourless. Our personal experiences colour the objects around us. The strategic use of primary colours in *The God of Small Things* reflects a colour subjectivism that is hard to ignore. In

his book *Colour for Philosophers*, L. C. Hardin says that in the most common analogical characterization, red and yellow are labeled as “advancing” or “warm” and blue and green as “receding” or “cool” colours, in kinetic and thermal terms respectively (Hardin 129). The same analogy propels *The God of Small Things*, where four colours control the narrative: Red, Blue, Yellow and Green.¹ In the 340-page novel, the word *red* appears 113 times; *blue* 96 times; *yellow* 72 times; and *green* 59 times. Mostly adjectival, these coloured word-pills do more than augment the nouns they represent; they set the mood for the surrounding vocabulary. The colours jostle for control over the page, at times appearing alone in overwhelming clusters in the same paragraph. Elsewhere all four colours are crammed competitively together in the same sentence.

I

Of the four colours, Red and Blue are the warring parties. The main characters are associated with a colour loyalty, as are the silent yet powerful inanimate objects in the novel. Pappachi, Baby Kochamma and Margaret Kochamma are the main representatives of the old social order that is under the threat of losing its grip on the local community. Everything about them is blue, symbolized by the “skyblue Plymouth” which stands rotting outside the Ayemenem House. Ammu, Rahel & Estha, Velutha, and Comrade Pillai represent rebellion and change, with “red flags” (64; 65; 71; 79; 80; 81; 205) as their predominant insignia. Other characters are constantly being pulled from one colour zone into the other: Mammachi’s “mounds of red chillies” (47) for pickle-making show the first sparks of a rebellion against Pappachi’s “skyblue” rule. Chacko, who otherwise appears lazily neutral, establishes a preference when he changes the colour of Paradise Pickles & Preserves labels from an earthy green to distinct shades of blue (276), following the arrival of Margaret Kochamma in the Ayemenem House “with her blue dress and legs underneath” (270). From the beginning the readers are struck by the “skyblue Plymouth” with chrome tailfins.² It is important to note that “skyblue” appears as one word and is not hyphenated. The fact that the reader is informed about the car’s history reveals its importance as

a code. We are told that Pappachi bought it from an Englishman and that he wouldn't allow Mammachi or anyone to sit in it because "the Plymouth was Pappachi's revenge" (48).

When Mammachi becomes successful in her jam and pickle-making venture, Pappachi finds it unbearable because "he did not consider pickle-making a suitable job for a high-ranking ex-Government official" (47), and, being a jealous man, he resents his wife getting attention. Feeling the pressure, we are told that he would weave "sullen circles around mounds of red chillies ... watching Mammachi supervise the buying, the weighing, the salting and drying, of limes and tender mangoes. Every night he beat her with a brass flower vase" (47). The red of the chillies is an obvious disturbance to the rule of the colour blue. When Chacko comes home from Oxford for the summer, he warns his father against beating Mammachi. Pappachi stops, but never speaks to his wife again. Lines are drawn, and he buys the skyblue Plymouth to make just such statement.

Each time Roy employs the compound "skyblue" in the narrative, it draws a powerful dividing line between the old and new forces. Blue reflects shades of the last lingering vestiges of British superiority. By Chacko's own admission, "they were a family of Anglophiles" (52), with Pappachi at their head. He makes Rahel and Estha look up the word in the *Reader's Digest Great Encyclopaedic Dictionary*, which says: "*person well disposed to the English*." It is not surprising, therefore, to see everything conservative as blue, and everything radical as red. Above Aymenem the sky is "skyblue" (like the Plymouth) in the novel (6; 125; 139; 154; 204). This blue sky does not signify freedom; rather, it represents a claustrophobic enclosure. We are told that following her husband's death, Margaret Kochamma's "grief was a fresh, shining blue" (143). This unusual colouring of such abstractions as feelings and auditory sensations is startling. Readers are sucked into the world of audio-visual synaesthesia when they find that Comrade Pillai has "a voice full of [...] red banners that arced across blue skies" (121). The conservative blue sky is the perfect foil for his communist red banners. The Orthodox Syrian Christian church is also resistant to social change, and as such, more favourable to the blue order. It too has a painted blue sky that is re-

peatedly referred to as “a blue churchsky” (6; 153; 215; 339). The church has its own blue bell-jar. Even days are labeled “skyblue” (35; 45). On a “skyblue day,” a “skyblue Plymouth” takes the children to watch *The Sound of Music* (35). Seen through Estha and Rahel’s subjective eyes, the movie starts with “the camera soar[ing] up in the skyblue (car-coloured) Austrian sky with the clear, sad sound of church bells” (99). The “electric blue foamleather car-sofa in the Abilash Talkies Princess Circle Lobby” reinforces the exclusiveness of the Anglophile upper class (101).

The colour blue is often negatively associated with sadness, fear and depression. On the positive side, it signifies harmony, confidence and cleanliness. Inside the Ayemenem house, Ammu’s is a “bedroom with blue curtains” (224). Estha’s vision of her, as he watches Ammu sleeping, is smeared with blue (119). However, any possible positive connotations of blue are cancelled out by the attachment of the word “barred” alongside it. The streetlight falling on Ammu’s sleeping face is an abstract “barred-blue”. So is the window, which instead of an opening to the outside world, is also barred-blue. The choice of this compound adjective is interesting because it informs upon itself instead of the noun following it. It is a subjective reflection of an internal state of fear and sadness. The dolphin imagery and the elemental blue of water in Ammu’s dream, is not beautiful. Instead, it is a silent scream, reflecting a fear of drowning in the seas of convention.

Estha’s vision becomes the ‘blue cross-stitch afternoon’ (201; 217; 220; 226; 321), a phrase used repeatedly after the first instance. It stems from Estha watching Ammu, who “had pressed roses from the blue cross-stitch counterpane on her cheek” (217) as she lay asleep. It is interesting that while Estha speculates on the outward manifestation of her blueness, Ammu is dreaming, matching blue dreams inside her head. She dreams of a man holding her, who has only one arm and “could do only one thing at a time” (215). The setting is a beach littered with broken blue glass bottles. Each wave brings new blue bottles to be broken. The blue metaphor speaks volumes. In the novel, Ammu’s defeat by blue is complete. Dying alone, her dead face with the “deep blue sac under one eye that was bloated like a bubble” (162) is a blue triumph. Rahel, riding to the crematorium in the hired van with Ammu’s

corpse like “a dead Roman senator,” notices that “it made the blue sky bluer” (162) in its revenge.

Wherever apparel is mentioned, it evokes an underlying team-colour theme. Estha and Rahel have been brought up as Anglophiles aspiring to an English view of goodness and acceptability. They yearn to be on the list of Julia Andrews' favourite things in the motion-picture *The Sound of Music*, which includes children “in white dresses with blue satin sashes” (106). Yet they know they can never quite attain that elusive level. Unlike them, and quite unfairly, as can be seen in Chacko's photograph of Sophie Mol as a seven years old, she was “White and blue” (118). She has “bluegreyblue eyes” (143; 145; 148; 149; 174; 238), a phrase which reverberates like a drumbeat in the pages that follow. Margaret arrives from London in a “blue and white floral polyester dress” (239). We are also told that, in the surroundings of the police station following Velutha's gruesome death, “sweat stained Baby Kochamma's light blue blouse dark blue” (315), firmly placing her in a blue position. When he takes over the pickle business from Mammachi, Chacko's contribution is to introduce a uniform for the workers. It is white, with blue aprons. The workers turn out to welcome Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol upon their arrival, all “blue-aproned, white-capped, like a clot of smart blue and white flags” (172). The workers are repeatedly referred to as “the blue-aproned army” (172), or simply “Blue Army” (173; 180; 200). Elsewhere the workers appear as “the Blue Army in the greenheat” (180; 182; 193). The deliberate use of capitalization gives this designation a distinct feel of a politically assigned organization on duty in the “green-heat” of the surrounding scene.

Of all the characters, there is no one bluer than Baby Kochamma. Blue is Baby Kochamma's protection against the world she has renounced. Her only youthful rebellion is her passion for Father Mulligan, whose attention she tries to attract by “force-bath[ing] a poor village child at the well with hard red soap that hurt its protruding ribs” (23). Using the low-quality, hard *red* soap seems to have been her only experience of rebellion. Inside the house, soaps are an aristocratic blue (93; 227). Following her failure in love, she commits herself to the blue-order forever. She makes a garden at Ayemenem house,

where “like a lion-tamer she tamed twisting vines and nurtured bristling cacti” (27), forcing her own instinct into submission in the process. It is not surprising that “in the centre of Baby Kochamma’s garden, surrounded by beds of canna and phlox, a marble cherub peeps an endless silver arc into a shallow pool in which a single *blue* lotus bloomed” (27; emphasis added). So central is the “blue vein[ed]” (95) Baby Kochamma to the blue theme, that the skyblue Plymouth and her character appear unlikely female twins, a constant parallel to the “two-egg twins” (2), Estha and Rahel. Baby Kochamma and the Plymouth often occur together, or as a reflection of each other. The Plymouth is described as a “big lady [...] tailfins aflutter” (113), and compared to “a wide lady squeezing down a narrow corridor, like Baby Kochamma in church, on her way to the bread and wine” (65). Long after Sophie Mol dies and all things change, and Baby Kochamma becomes the sole owner of the Ayemenem House which now has an emptied and bare look, “the skyblue Plymouth with chrome tailfins was *still* parked outside, and inside, Baby Kochamma was *still* alive” (2; emphasis added), a defiant outpost holding out till the end.

For all the blue in the narrative, the novel does offer some consolation and a hope for changing tides. As Baby Kochamma ages into a comic figure, so does the old order of things, and along with it, the symbolic Plymouth, which rusts, and, with every successive monsoon, “settled more firmly into the ground [...] grass grew around its flat tyres [and] the Paradise Pickles & Preserves signboard rotted and fell inwards like a collapsed crown” (295). With the skyblue Plymouth withering outside the Ayemenem house, and with the soap inside the house which is a “crumbling bright blue”, the last remains of blue crumble away.

II

In the novel, red appears not only as a colour signifying rebellion, but also as an omen of bad consequences, much like Hardy’s symbolic red ribbons, strawberries and blood in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, all of which foreshadow the misfortunes that befall the central character. The red in *Tess* is a precursory symbol of Tess’s final sacrifice at the altar of the gods. So is Velutha’s blood symbolic of his sacrifice at the blue altar of

the Ayemenem Police Station. He pays the price for daring to reach beyond his class, up towards a blue sky. Rahel sees it coming at Sophie Mol's funeral in the yellow church, when she looks up at the ceiling, imagines Velutha painting the "blue churchsky," and "thought of what would happen if the rope snapped [...] [Velutha] lying broken on the hot church floor, *dark blood spilling from his skull like a secret*" (6; emphasis added). Here Velutha is seen as a tragicomic trapeze artist attempting a final act of daring. Estha is to witness much later what Rahel has already foreseen:

The lockup was pitch-dark. Estha could see nothing, but he could hear the sound of rasping, labored breathing.... Someone turned on the light. Bright. Blinding. Velutha appeared on the scummy, slippery floor. A mangled genie invoked by a modern lamp. He was naked, his soiled mundu had come undone. *Blood spilled from his skull like a dark secret.* (319–320; emphasis added)

Rahel is a silent prophetess, predicting the future in her "yellow-rimmed red plastic sunglasses [which] made the world look red" (37), and it is no wonder that "Ammu said that they were bad for her eyes and had advised her to wear them as seldom as possible" (37). The "red sunglasses" (301; 311) seem to help Rahel see things that others overlook. That is why "on that skyblue December day, it was *him* [Velutha] that she [Rahel] saw through the sunglasses, marching with a red flag at the level crossing outside Cochin" (79). Through her red glasses she also becomes instinctively aware of the danger, and instead of what has until now been a "skyblue" sky, she "could see pieces of red sky. And in the red sky, hot red kites wheeled, looking for rats. In their hooded yellow eyes there was a road and red flags marching" (79). No one else appears to have seen Velutha marching with a red flag. In Ammu's case, she does not *want* anyone to see him. She is angry and tells Rahel to shut up when she insists she saw him (71).

In her red sunglasses, Rahel's eyes are sensitized to vibrations of rebellion. She has an almost "infra-red" vision that sees beyond the visible. It is through her eyes that readers hear warning bells in the novel:

Rahel walked across to the old well where there were usually some ants to kill. Red ants had a sour farty smell when they were squashed [...] Rahel put on her sunglasses and looked back [...] Everything was angry-coloured. Sophie Mol, standing between Margaret Kochamma and Chacko, looked as though she ought to be slapped. Rahel found a whole column of juicy ants. They were on their way to church. All dressed in red. They had to be killed before they got there. Squished and squashed with a stone. You can't have smelly ants in church. (185)

Red smelly ants on a march are a crystal-ball reflection of smelly Paravans marching with red flags, who will end up being squashed for breaking with convention. It is also to Rahel that the red betel spit stains on the cement kangaroo litter bins at Cochin Airport seem like "fresh wounds" (138). Her sensitivity to red is painful. All she sees is "red-mouthed roos with ruby smiles [that] moved cemently across the airport floor" (139). The red feeling stays with Rahel throughout the airport experience, and even when they leave, "in the doorway of the Arrivals Lounge, a shadowy, red-mouthed roo-shaped silhouette waved a cemently paw *only at Rahel*. Cement kisses whirled through the air like small helicopters" (152; emphasis added).

Much later, while Estha makes his ill fated runaway plans in the pickle factory, Rahel follows him there, and red takes over again:

A gauze door creaked [...] and yellow-rimmed red plastic sunglasses looked in with the sun behind her. The factory was Angry-coloured. The salted limes were red. The tender mangoes were red. The label cupboard was red. The dusty sunbeam was red. (197)

It is there, we are told, that Estha's "Red Agenda was worked out" (200), resulting in Sophie Mol's death. Red symbols predict two tragic deaths in the novel. From the two red roses presented by Chacko to Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol on their arrival, to the "bumpy red road" (171) that brings them to Ayemenem House, the warn-

ing signs are clear. Furthermore, Chacko leads "Margaret Kochamma and Sophie Mol triumphantly up the nine *red* steps [of the verandah of Ayemenem House] like a pair of tennis trophies" (173; emphasis mine). Velutha's horrific death, predicted by Rahel, is made to seem all the more imminent when we are told that "three days before the Terror, he had let them [Rahel and Estha] paint his nails with red cutex that Ammu had discarded" (190), repeatedly referred to as "blood-red nails" (191; 307) for added emphasis. Velutha's indignity is complete when he is ridiculed by the policemen after being beaten to near death. They notice his nails and mock him, calling him a bisexual: "AC-DC?" they laugh (311).

Red is repeatedly used in the narrative as a sign of impending danger. The concentration of the word red in the narrative increases with the approach of bad happenings. Before the "Orangedrink Lemondrink Man" (101) incident that inflicts lasting trauma upon Estha, the scene is smeared with red. The restroom doors in Abhilash Talkies are red formica (94). They "had to rush up the *red* steps with the old *red* carpet. *Red* staircase with *red* spit stains in the *red* corner" (97; emphasis mine). Ominously, the "red sign over the door said EXIT in a red light" (101). In typical Roy style, the steps become 'redsteps', one of the many colour compound words in the novel, repeated over and over in the pages that follow (111; 112; 114; 115).

III

Yellow predominantly represents fear in the novel, although most of the negative characteristics attached to the colour yellow in the context of colour psychology, like cowardice, illness, dishonesty, and weakness, also have ample representation throughout. The most important yellow marker in the story is the "yellow church" (4; 5; 6; 13; 139; 171; 224; 263; 331). Twice we are told that "the yellow church swelled like a throat with the sound of sad singing" (4; 6). The emphasis on Sophie Mol's "yellow Crimplene bellbottoms" (4) visually extends the analogy of church bells. That is why at least in two instances, the bellbottoms have been specifically rephrased as "yellow bottoms of bells" (141; 186), emphasizing the word bell more than the shape of the attire itself. It is

almost as if Sophie's movement in her bellbottoms is indicative of silent, fearful bells.

The yellow church is a chorus of fear, and the cowardly swelling of its throat is supplemented by the weeping of the "yellow bamboo" elsewhere (148; 203). From a religious perspective, fate is playing out an inevitable drama of human weakness. It is being witnessed by the priestly, confessional yellow bamboo. The tragic drama unravels in stages, from "yellow bamboo arch[ing] downward" (203) in silent disapproval, to "yellow bamboo droop[ing] into the river as though grieving in advance for what they knew was going to happen" (291). Finally, "yellow bamboo wept" (333; 335) for yet another sad ending. The same fear is reflected by the "yellow maps [that] gossiped in sibilant, papery whispers" (53) in the History House, other mute witnesses to Sophie Mol's death. Yellow plays a cowardly role. It is traditional, and fearful of change. When a grownup Rahel returns to Ayemenem House, she watches "toads hop from stone to scummy stone" (187) in the abandoned ornamental garden. They are "fat. Yellow [...] Funnily self-assured" (188), as if happy in their protective ignorance. Like Philip Larkin's "Toads," they defy change.

As a symbol of fear, yellow is nowhere more apparent than in the "yellow teeth" (102; 103) of the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man. His "teeth, like yellow piano keys" (102) watch Estha and make him feel uneasy and afraid. Estha's choice of a lemon drink is a reflection of both yellow cowardice, and fear of the uneasy situation he is placed in by the man. More generally, yellow is attached to bodily excretions and dirt, such as, for example, Kuttapen's catheterization to a "bottle of yellow liquid" (209); Khubchand's urinating "unsteadily, bright yellowy" (12) inside the house; Baby Kochamma's urination reflected in Rahel's imagination as "a yellow brook burbling through a mountain pass" (95); and the "yellow municipal garbage truck" (296). Even the red ants mentioned earlier as an analogy of a marching rebellion are later quelled by yellow urine, when "Police-piss" leaves behind a sad picture of "drowned ants in yellow bubbly" (307) as the policemen prepare to beat Velutha to death. These are all manifestations of disgust.

IV

Green, outnumbered in its occurrence as a word, is, nevertheless, more pervasive as a steady backdrop in the novel than the brighter flashes of the other colours. Green is the colour of earth, fertility and youthful inexperience, but also the colour of undergrowth. It can be vine-like, overwhelming and oppressive. It has a slow but inevitable final power. Baby Kochamma's garden is taken over by curling vines and vegetation, as is the rotting skyblue Plymouth. Against the overwhelming green, reinforced visually in the narrative by constant references to the burst of monsoon vegetation, all other colours finally subside. Readers face a heady succession of green sentences spilling with visions of "green rice-fields" (121), "green mangoes and peppercorns" (193), "brickwalls [that] turn mossgreen" (1), and nodding "green nettles" (10). Green conquers all.

This glut of "immodest green" (1), however, is also used by Roy to reflect choking oppression. Nature and instinct, if suppressed, can go mouldy and bad. The river, central to the story since it is the cause of Sophie Mol's death, is described in both positive and negative green. At times labeled beautifully as "a slow green whisper" (204), the river changes into an unhealthy picture of "thick, viscous water covered with a luminous film of green scum" (205). At its ugliest, the river is "a slow, sludging green ribbon lawn that ferried fetid garbage to the sea" (124) and the sea in turn is "black, the spume vomit green" (216). The same metaphor of sickly green water occurs whenever the twins have a sinking bad sensation. Estha has a "greenwavy, seaweedy, bottomless-bottomful" (109) feeling of helplessness that makes him vomit in Abilash Talkies. The same "green-wavy, thick-watery, lumpy seaweedy, floaty, bottomless-bottomful feeling" (323) overpowers him in the train when he is being separated from his twin, and sent away to his father. The train takes on a green intensity, drowning him in its green, watery womb:

Every First Class train thing was green. The seats were green.
The berths green. The floor green. The chains green. Darkgreen
Lightgreen.

TO STOP TRAIN PULL CHAIN, it said in green.

OT POTS NIART LLUP NIAHC, Estha thought in green.
(323–324)

The same oppression can be read in the word “greenheat” (173; 182; 193), used repeatedly for the Ayemenem surroundings. The principal of an inverse-spectrum (Humphrey 51) seems to be employed here, as the usual combination of red-heat is replaced by a subjective greenheat.

Spontaneity is an overriding factor in the success of Arundhati Roy’s first, and by her own admission, perhaps only novel. The prevalent use of personal symbols may limit the novel’s appeal to a wider audience, but firmly establishes its unique narrative style. The subjectivity of her semi-autobiographical characters seeps into the colour of the narrative with ease. It would not be not easy to follow up on a novel like *The God of Small Things* without the danger of losing the one thing that makes it memorable: its colouration.

Notes

- 1 Refer to “The evolution of colour categories” (167) in chapter III of L. C. Hardin’s *Colour for Philosophers* for an interesting reading of the difference in levels of significance assigned to the vocabulary for the four primary colours in various languages. According to Hardin, red is perceptually the most salient and arousing in all languages, and blue the least significant of the four colours.
- 2 The “skyblue Plymouth” is mentioned on pages 35, 48, 65, 113, 153, 172. In other places, various body-parts of the car are also described as “skyblue,” for example the “skyblue bonnet” (70) and “skyblue door” (80). Even the sounds it makes are “skyblue carsounds” (171).

Works Cited

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